

2 Kings 2: 1-12 Evensong

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit
Amen

Quite often one hears of businesses or companies where succession to leadership is through promoting a natural successor within the organisation.

Such was the case in 2 Kings chapter 2, because Elijah was succeeded by his friend and co-worker Elisha taking over his ministry by picking up Elijah's mantle or cloak as a symbol, or proof, that he was Elijah's successor.

I'm now going to describe a journey, and I have to say that when I started writing this it reminded me so much of my dad.

You see me dad was a bit like a walking road map. If I said I was going to some distant place he'd then tell me how to get there; all the right and left hand turns I'd have to make, and the landmarks to look out for.

His intentions of course were good, but I have to say that it was seldom helpful because by the time we'd got to the umpteenth turn and the umpteenth landmark I'd forgotten all that went before and the result was always confusion on my part.

You are now about to find out what I mean about confusion, when I relate Elijah and Elisha's journey, because the distance from Gilgal to Jericho was about one mile.

But to get from Gilgal to Jericho they went via Bethel, a round trip of about 30 miles; and I know that my dad's instructions wouldn't have sent me via Bethel.

Turning now to Elijah and Elisha's journey, our reading starts with an indication that Elijah was about to be taken up to heaven.

It is important to note here that we are told that Elijah was to be taken up to heaven, not that he would die; but that before he goes he wants to undertake a journey.

So Elijah sets off from Gilgal to Bethel, but when Elisha tries to go with him Elijah tells him to stay in Gilgal. But Elisha said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you, so they both went to Bethel'.

Verse 3 tells us that at Bethel a group of prophets met Elisha and told him that Elijah was going to be taken from him, but Elisha said, 'Yes, I know; keep silent'.

In verse 4 Elijah said, 'The Lord has sent me to Jericho', but Elijah told Elisha to stay in Bethel, But Elisha said, 'As the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, I will not leave you, so they both went down to Jericho'.

For me this raises three questions. The first question is why go 30 miles to get to Jericho when you need only go about 1 mile.

Perhaps it was because Elijah was testing Elisha's devotion by making an unnecessary journey to try and ensure that Elisha, as a true disciple, would follow in his foot steps, without question.

My Second question is why did Elijah keep on trying to discourage Elisha from going with him by asking him to stay behind, again it was probably for the same reason to test his devotion and dedication even when continually being discouraged.

And the third question is why did Elisha keep telling all the prophets they saw, who told him that Elijah was about to be taken up to heaven, to keep silent. Quite simply because both Elijah and Elisha didn't want it to become common knowledge.

In verse 5 another group of prophets told Elisha that Elijah was going to be taken up to heaven, but again he told them that he knew and to be silent.

This last group of prophets also confirms for me that there was a healthy number of people who had a close relationship with God in Israel at that time.

In verse 6 Elijah said to Elisha stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan. But Elisha replied “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live I will not leave you”, so the two of them walked on.

And when they arrived at the Jordan Elijah struck the water with his cloak and both Elijah and Elisha walked out of the Promised Land on dry ground.

Now Gilgal, where they started their journey, and where they more or less finished their round trip before going to the Jordan, was also the first stopping place after the Israelites, under the leadership of Joshua, crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land some 600 years earlier, see Joshua chapter 4 verses 1 to 9; so Gilgal was an important place for the Israelites.

In addition it was at Gilgal that male Israelites, who were born during the forty years trek in the desert, were circumcised.

It was also there where Joshua celebrated a Passover, and to teach those Israelites, who were born in the desert, the story of how they left Egypt; Joshua chapter 5 tells us all about it.

Now about 1200 years earlier Jacob was travelling from Beersheba to Haran when at night he dreamt that he saw a stairway reaching from the earth to heaven and that God was standing next to him saying, “This land will be for you and your descendants, and Jacob named the place Bethel see Genesis chapter 28.

So Bethel's significance is also pivotal in the history of Israel.

As for Jericho, Jericho was the first city to fall to Joshua in the campaign to make the Promised Land of Canaan theirs.

If you remember the Israelites marched round Jericho seven times and on the seventh day and at the blast of the ram's horn Jericho fell to the Israelites.

So Elijah and Elisha were retracing the steps of Jacob and Joshua; they were taking in places that were significant to Israel's history.

And as Joshua struck the Jordan river, which allowed the Israelites to cross into the promised land on dry ground, so too Elisha struck the Jordan river with Elijah's cloak to also cross on dry land back into the Promised Land after Elijah had gone up to heaven.

I hope all that's clear, as my dad would have said.

Now people would be correct if they said that without Moses the Jewish faith in God as illustrated in the Old Testament may never have happened, similarly without Elijah, it could well have been made extinct by the followers of the pagan god of Baal under queen Jezebel, that's how important Moses and Elijah are to the history of Israel.

Now if Elijah is identified as equivalent to Moses then Elisha is an equivalent to Joshua. As Joshua took over from Moses so Elisha took over from Elijah.

In the fifth century BC the prophet Malachi predicted that the return of Elijah would precede the 'Great terrible day of the Lord.

And in both Matthew and in Mark's gospel Jesus infers that John the Baptist had resumed the ministry of Elijah.

And as Elisha succeeded Elijah so Jesus succeeded John the Baptist; and in Matthew chapter 28 we are told to take up Christ's mantle and go therefore to all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you.

It follows therefore that without Moses the religion of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob may have been quite different, and without Elijah it may have become extinct; in the same way without Jesus the true nature of God would not have been revealed to us and without all the generations of Christians down through the ages, the true nature of God may well have been lost or confined to the museums.

It follows therefore that we are to be Elisha's in our generation and stand up for Jesus, and in Matthew chapter 28 verse 19 Jesus tells us to make disciples of all nations, that is our commission.

We are to boast in our hope, we're not to keep it to ourselves, but tell everyone, so that others may share in our hope, and in our joy at Knowing Jesus.

When we keep the good news of Christ to ourselves we're not obeying God's will, God wants us to share the good news and bring others to faith in Christ, he doesn't want us to be selfish, he wants us to be Elisha's in our generation, and pick up Christ's mantle; that is our calling.

We now come to verse 9 where Elijah asks Elisha what he can do for him and he replied, "Please let me inherit a double share

of your spirit,” Please note it's a spiritual gift Elisha is asking for.

In Jewish families at that time the eldest son would inherit double the amount of his brothers, for example if there were three sons then the father would divide his estate into four parts and the eldest would get two parts, it was a sign that the eldest would take the family forward to the next generation.

Elisha was asking to be Elijah's spiritual successor. The reason Elijah said that was a hard thing to do was because that was for God to decide, not Elijah's decision to make.

However, he added, that if you see me taken from you, then it will be granted to you, if not, it will not; and following that encouragement they continued walking.

Then in verse 11 and 12 a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated them and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven and Elisha saw him ascending.

Because God is so often depicted as fire, many commentators believe it was God coming between them and separating them. Also despite popular belief Elijah ascended in a whirlwind, not in a chariot of fire.

Now although verse 13 and 14 aren't a part of our reading nevertheless in those two verses we read that Elisha picks up the mantle or cloak that Elijah had left behind, and as I mentioned

before, struck the water with it and he crossed back into the Promised Land on dry ground, and Elisha indeed became Elijah's successor.

As we sit let us pray,

Lord Jesus help us to be Elisha's in our generation;
through our faith,
through our obedience,
and through our love for you and for all God's people.

Amen